

Dumbo Feather Magazine 'Pass it On' - Issue Four

Kevin Roberts is equal parts the boy from Lancaster, Northern England, the New York advertising exec, and New Zealand family man. He talks to us about getting kicked out of school for getting his girlfriend pregnant, his unique approach to leading a global organisation of 7,000 of the most creative people on the planet, how he is using that position of influence to change the world, and last, but not least – LOVE.

Df Now, I kinda know your story, because I think in the past couple of days I must have read almost everything ever written by you, and about you.

Kevin Oh, I'm so sorry! I haven't.

Df No?

Kevin I never read an article once it's done, never watched myself on a documentary, I never do rehearsals or looking-back analysis. It's all about the future, I don't really care about yesterday, I very much live for tomorrow and massively for today. I look into the future all the time, I look forward. I have a terrible memory.

Df So you obviously don't spend time mulling over how on earth you got to where you are now?

Kevin No, not really at all.

Df Until a journalist asks you.

Kevin Yeah, and then I try and answer the question as I think about it – I may answer it differently each time, I don't know.

Df When you look at the jigsaw puzzle of your life, you can see how the pieces fit together, but not anyone would take those pieces and do what you've done.

Kevin I don't think most people would want to! I mean why would you want to do what I want to do? I've chosen something for me that's really personal that I love doing. I mean I would love to do this [Dumbo feather], it's so like, "Wow man, what a great thing", but I could never have done that and never will be able to do that, it's just a beautiful thing to see someone else do it. The point is, you want to be the best you can be and have a blast doing it, and you want to make a difference, and you want to be able to share stuff, and you want to be in control of your own destiny and in control of your own happiness, and if you can get yourself into that position as fast as you can and you can get yourself into that when you don't have anything right? All this Darwinian stuff of survival, and wealth, and power, and fame – that stuff in today's generation is so taken for granted – we're very lucky. We don't live in Africa (*see page 51 *African Story*) where you have to be very Darwinian, we don't live in Mexico or Bangladesh – we're here and we've got a real head-start.

Df We're way up Maslow's hierarchy [of needs].

Kevin Absolutely, boy oh boy, so if you screw that up and you choose to be

bland and average and boring, that's okay too for you because hopefully your inner self is satisfied by all that stuff – there are a lot of people doing it.

Df But if you're not satisfied, then you've got no one else to blame.

Kevin: No. I mean everything's in your favour. It doesn't matter now what school you went to, if you went to one, what sex you are, what sexual proclivity you have, it doesn't really matter if you're dyslexic... Because there are ways now – technology and culture have opened things up for us, in a very liberating way it seems to me.

Df Levelled the playing field definitely.

Kevin Absolutely. In our world. There are still two billion people for whom that's not occurring and that's really irritating, especially at this time of the US elections where you've got these two unspeakable bozos, and one of them's going to be the leader of the free world – it's just a shocking endorsement of the political system.

Df What's your opinion on the role of business in levelling that playing field globally?

Kevin What I stand for is 'the role of business is to make the world a better place for everyone', that's what I'm going to do, it's what I have been doing for the past five years, and what I'm going to do for the next ten because I've kinda satisfied a lot of other stuff. I can't be a spiritual leader, and I can't be a cultural leader, so I can't help in those areas where we all do need help, but I can help in my platform as a businessman. And not because of me, but because of my predecessors who have made Saatchi & Saatchi a very important brand. So when I call someone, someone like Kofi Annan, he tends to take the call not because it's me, but because it's from the Chief Executive of Saatchi & Saatchi. So I'm in a role which I think is very fortunate, and I don't want to abuse that and just be an antagonist and just do stupid ads, I want to try to make the world a better place for everyone, because I am that everyone, I come from a poor family, and I don't think anything else can. Every 'ism' that I've looked at, whether as we all start life as communists and socialists, and as we get older and richer we become more right wing and more capitalistic. But socialism hasn't really worked, communism certainly didn't work in Eastern Europe, the capitalism we practice today, which is the capitalism of exclusion, is not working – I mean that's why we have a lot of social unrest because people are marginalised, and they have no self-esteem, and there is no role for them in the world according to George – totalitarianism and the extremes are just as awful. I have no confidence in governments whatsoever, I think they're useless, and I think what you really need is a really in-touch, empathetic UN, and all this national crap we need to get rid of. We need to run every country with a board of 6 or 7 people and a CEO, diverse groups of very talented people, and pay them lots of money, and let them look after education, health, transport and nothing else – remove all these burdens of taxes and nonsensical government interventions. In Australia it's ludicrous! State governments and a Federal government – it's nonsensical for a country like this, and just holds all of you completely back from

expressing yourselves. I have no confidence in government – whether it's right or left I don't care, because the left are becoming more right and the right are becoming more left, everybody's becoming centrist, and they're all whores and I don't trust any of them. The way forward is a left-leaning socialist policy and a right-leaning economic policy – everybody knows that, and yet nobody puts that into force, it's appalling. So I have no confidence in government, I have no confidence unfortunately in religion doing that – but religion was never designed to do that, it was designed to give you spiritual sustenance and they're finding that tough enough to do now. The Catholics have an ageing leader who's out of touch and they have this whole policy which is so at odds with the world they now live in that it's not going to be a spiritual option for most young people, because it's a doctrine and people aren't going to be indoctrinated. The Anglicans stand for nothing so they're not relevant. The Buddhists just don't want to get involved in change – they're beautiful, wonderful people, but it's all about...

Df Going with the flow.

Kevin Yeah. So religion's not the answer, but what is? That really just leaves you with business, and I think I do something very important, which is to lead Saatchi & Saatchi which is an ideas and communication company. Communication is everything – humans need to communicate, not want to or like to, they need to communicate. It's what sets us apart. And that's what Saatchi does – we can bring to life your idea in a way that will enable your message to be communicated to more people. So if you think that business is the engine of human progress, I think that we, and companies like mine, are the lubricants, and so I feel very proud. So it's the only thing I'm going to do because I think I am in a great place to do something through our work. So how am I going to do that? I do that in a lot of ways, I'm big on sustainability. Of course we're here to generate shareholder value – right, and what? That's like falling off a log. So what are we going to do to create a legacy and to create a better world to live in? You've got to do something socially, culturally, and environmentally. So we have two ways of practicing – one, the way we practice ourselves, and second, the influence we can have on big clients and small clients. So we exert that at all times and in every way possible.

Df Have you ever not taken on a client because their ethics or values weren't aligned?

Kevin Yeah, I won't work for a tobacco company, I won't work for an extreme political party or religious unit, and I won't work for anything that's involved in war. So for instance, Saatchi & Saatchi London had the British Army and I would not work on it. But I don't impose that on the company because that's not my right. But I will work for beer companies! And we do sex shops as well, the daughter of Anita Roddick has a sex shop in the UK called Coco de Mer (*see page 61 "Peek-a-Boo Politics"*). It's very funny work and it wins lots of awards and our people love to work on it.

Df So you're not holier than thou!

Kevin No, not at all! I don't do good 'holy', and I don't do good 'than thou' either!

Df So who inspires you?

Kevin Oh, you inspired me with this! I found it superbly inspirational. I get inspiration mostly because I look for it and actively seek it. I put myself in positions to get it. I get it from everywhere.

Df Do you have any mentors as such?

Kevin I have been very fortunate to have been mentored throughout by life by different sets of guys actually. I mean, I was in Florida just last week and I went to visit an 87 year old guy who's now in a nursing home who's called Jack Byrum who took me from being a corporate, hard-arsed PepsiCo executive to a more free-flowing, creatively-driven player. So Jack worked with me for about 15 years and so I went to see him and it was really inspirational. Even in the period I was with him, an hour and a half, and he's got Alzheimer's and he gave me seven things I have to start doing differently. All very accurate. I called my best mate, and said, "You won't believe Byrum, he's got Alzheimer's and he's given me these bloody seven things", it's time to stop you know. I have a guy called John Wareham who's written a bunch of books and he's a fantastic guy. He wrote a book called, 'How To Break Out Of Prison', because he teaches killers on Rikers Island how to break out of their mental prisons. John's been very helpful to me since about 1999. Prior to that I had a couple of guys who kinda saved me when I was kicked out of school and all that kinda stuff, and took care of me from a self-belief and a self-esteem point of view for about five or ten years.

Df What kind of guys?

Kevin Well Norman Ellis was the first guy who is now 75, he was the headmaster of a different school to mine. I went to a great school called Lancaster Royal Grammar School, but had a big problem with authority there and I... We had an issue of moral importance – my girlfriend was the Head Girl at Lancaster Girls Grammar and she was pregnant through me, only the second time we'd done it too! We didn't know anything about anything in those days. The school wanted me to have the baby aborted and to terminate the relationship. Because I was captain of the first XV rugby team, and captain of the first XI cricket...

Df I see... and she was Head Girl...

Kevin She was Head Girl. And we thought that was absolutely abhorrent and so they kicked me out of school. Beautifully, the Girls Grammar didn't kick Barbara out of school, which was fantastic on their part. And so then, that was kinda it, then hell. I did all my A levels a year early, so I was a really high achiever, I was in a scholarship class, I got into the Grammar School on scholarship, and then suddenly I was nothing. But Norman Ellis made me captain of the local cricket and rugby teams, which in a town of 25,000 people was quite a big deal. I got caught stealing and he stepped in for me with the police so I didn't get a record – I've never knowingly broken the law since! So at 20 I was captaining guys of 30 which was no easy task and he coached me through that, taught me a lot about leadership.

Df Is fear part of your vocabulary?

Kevin No, it's an interesting question, I've been asked that before, and you know I'm not afraid of stuff because I came from a very poor background, and I left school very early when I was 16. So what's the worst that can happen? What can I be frightened of? I turned 55 yesterday, and I'm having the most fun of any 55 year old on earth, and I've felt that for 20 or 30 years. I don't get embarrassed, I don't think I'm omnipotent. I don't like perfection so it doesn't bother me if I screw up, I know I'm not super smart, I know I'm not super handsome. I'm not any of these super things and therefore I don't really care about being judged – I'm just an ordinary guy, trying to make a difference and trying to bring emotion and inspiration and stuff to life. So when you're doing that, there is no right or wrong, there's no performance evaluation, there's no rating. I've been married for 30 years to the same woman, I've got four great kids. I'm working at Saatchi & Saatchi which is like a dream – like playing football for Brazil – and I hang out with great people of all ages, and I'm at the leading edge of ideas – so great ideas come to me, and I see them and I feel them, I never do the same thing any two days in a row. So it's pretty great. And sure "Do you screw up a lot?", yeah, "Do you get disappointed?", yeah, "Do you fail?", yeah, "Do people let you know?", yeah, "Do you get hurt?", yeah, "Do you get frightened of all that?", nah. I'm not frightened of failure or success.

Df When you discuss the Lovemarks framework, you tend to do so in terms of external things – brands, products, services. But I'm particularly interested in what appears to be your extraordinary sense of self-acceptance and self-love...

Kevin You're quite right, because Lovemarks (*see page 58 *Hitting the Mark*) is really just an external manifestation of what I believe inside myself, which is that you have to go through life loving others, giving love, looking for it, sharing it. I think no matter how hard-boiled you are, whether you're an engineer, or where you live, or how old you are, the most fantastic feeling is to be loved and to love in return. There are different kinds of love – I'm not suggesting you're going to love your wife the way you love your dog, or the way you love Adidas or your iPod – it's a kind of higher order that's so much more exciting than just respect, trust, loyalty, devotion. It's very cool, just as I think inspiration is a very cool thing to try... I mean I find your magazine just so inspiring and I'm sure that's its whole focus – I don't know what the one-word equity for it is – but it's probably inspiration because all the stories are really inspirational and really reach out and touch you. And whoever you are – whether you're 23 or 55, male or female – I know the first edition of the magazine touched us both multiple times, and left you feeling, "Wow, I want to read that again, it's extraordinary". It's ordinary people doing extraordinary things right? It's just a better way to go through stuff isn't it? And most people feel like this of course, and then they come to work and they check in their emotions – the language changes, their body-language changes, their focus changes, and the way they respond and react changes – and they become very super-rational

and straight. I am very interested in the science side of life, how science is far more artistic than people talk about and I think a lot of today's and tomorrow's heroes are scientists. And not because of discipline, rigour and brainpower, but because of emotional intelligence – because they touch and feel, curiosity, dissatisfaction, and intuition. Most of the time these guys gamble completely – they have no idea when they set off onto this path – it's really fantastic. Donald Calne the neurologist, he said that the difference between emotion and reason is really simple – “reason leads to conclusions, emotion leads to actions”. So that's a bit Sesame Street, and a bit of a bumper sticker thing, but sometimes you need – or I do anyway – to have a primary thought you can hang on to and hang stuff around, and that was a really big thought! And that's what happens with business – we rationally approach a decision, we analyse it, we have a meeting, we have another meeting, we have a meeting to have a meeting, nothing happens, and then everything fails! Take new products – they've all been rationally analysed, research and tested in every normal way – and 95 out of 100 fail and it's laughable to me. So it's like Einstein said – not sure, but it's usually Einstein so I'll go with that – that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result. And that's so much what businesses do because they don't trust their emotions and when you get emotional... I mean there's no way rationally you can publish this [Dumbo feather], forget it, no one's going to give you the time of day, but I hope that it becomes the most successful, intriguing, insightful, curious publication the world's ever seen.

Df That's something to dream about!

Kevin I think so, because you know, there's another magazine that I'm really interested in now, there's only been one edition – it's called Mastermind – in the US, it's written by two girls in their thirties and it's this incredible, unbelievable, interactive, intellectual, stimulating, weird – like being on some kind of imagination trip of stimulation and you have no idea what's the point or the purpose and it's intriguing, stimulating, testing as hell.

Df Wonderful! I'd imagine you're a big fan of chaos theory.

Kevin I'm a big fan of quantum physics really – you look at all these probabilities and throw them up in the air. The nuance that I have on that stuff is that you are responsible for your own happiness. When you move into these random areas and throw stuff up, you must not confuse delegation with responsibility. You cannot delegate totally to chaos theory without accepting in yourself that if you have the will and the purpose and the courage – these are stupid words, but you know what I mean – you must impose yourself on the outcome of all this chaos to shape it the way your heart wants to go, not where your stupid head wants to go, because your stupid head only knows where it's been before and where everybody else goes – you've got to listen to your heart.

Df I think I read somewhere that your motto is...

Kevin I don't have a motto, but what I might have referred to is what's going to be written on my tombstone which is 'I've tried in my way to

be free', which is a Leonard Cohen idea. And that's what I've tried in my way – to be free, to be creatively free, spiritually free, to be free of prejudice, free of fear.

Df You don't appear to be attached to your position, or role, or people's perception and that is almost the source of your power – bad word, but I think you know what I mean.

Kevin It's certainly my belief that you will never, ever hear me saying, "I don't agree", "That's not right", "We're going to do it this way". I just don't believe in all that stuff. I'm much more into pointing, than managing or leading, so I never check back with people to see if they've done it, never. I just try and share what it is we're trying to do, why it's important – 'First we take Manhattan and then we take Berlin', then that's it – either let's do it, or let's not do it, if you don't do it, don't tell me you didn't do it. Because that's okay too.

Df So you're the antithesis of a micro-manager!

Kevin Oh Jesus, I really am a crap manager because I don't do any management because I'm no good at it, I have no confidence at it, I can't be managed, I don't believe in managing. Ask anyone at Saatchi & Saatchi Sydney if I have any management skills and they'd find it laughable. I think you inspire people if you share a purpose, you share a dream, you share some beliefs about what you stand for and what you believe in and then you give people the greatest imaginable challenge that's just, just at the very end of their ability to get there and then you resource them and inspire them and get the hell out of the way! In my experience, people in their twenties – the average age of our company is 27 globally – and that's fantastic right because good ideas come from everywhere and they especially come from young people who don't know what they don't know, thank goodness. So I'm very lucky because I connect with people like you whereas most CEOs don't and it's a shame for them. I mean one thing I think is that the further up the company, the more stupid you become.

Df There's that theory that we're promoted to our level of incompetence.

Kevin That's the Peter Principle, but it's not that really, it's for two reasons. People lie to you all the time when you're the CEO because they're looking to position themselves in this hierarchy of bureaucracy. So they tell you porky pies, they tell you what they think you want to hear and that will make you feel good about them. So it's a complete fabrication – and they're very skilled and very smart so you don't know that you've been lied to. And the second thing with CEOs is that we don't live like everybody else and yet we like to think we're in touch and so we do home visits, and we do store visits, and we talk to our kids, and we can use a Tivo, and we've got an iPod. But we're dangerous as hell because we're so out of touch it's not funny, and yet we're kidding ourselves we're in touch.

Df You've worked with some pretty wonderful women over the years – Mary Quant...

Kevin She was the first. We live in the age of inclusion now – we've gone through all this feminist stuff, that's really boring – good on the

generation before you, they took you through that – now the world belongs to you women. Seventy percent of our [Saatchi & Saatchi] people are female, all purchasing decisions are made by females, men are just driven to achieve. The whole testosterone thing, very linear – perform, hunt, generate food and they'll get sidelined into things like being president and all this kind of stuff. Women are now really influencing culture, they're influencing the future, they're influencing our kids, they're influencing our homes, they're influencing our communication because they're empathetic, because they are genetically different, because they're now as educated, as able, much more balanced... And it's a big problem too for them because they hit their thirties and they have the complexities of family, of children, of parents and all the stuff at home because men are big compartmentalists. They get up in the morning and they go to work, and they don't think about anything except work whereas the woman's thinking about life... So it's not without its complexity at all, but it is a beautiful thing. We have a woman just joined us to run our biggest agency in New York, Mary Baglivo who we have been lusting over for six years to have come work with us, and we finally persuaded her. And she has, in two weeks, already created a whole new feeling around the place because she is so empathetic and in touch intuitively, and very fast because her feelings are not burdened by all this male crap. So we need both – I wouldn't have a company of a hundred women, it'd be a nightmare – nothing'd get done, but it's all about diversity right. I want to have a room with males, females, young people, old people, people of every religion, people of every colour – not because it's politically correct, because I couldn't give a shit about that, but because it's a competitive advantage. Guess what, that's what the population out there looks like.

Df It seems like you're just someone who cuts through the crap.

Kevin Make the complex simple, yeah, just follow your heart, follow your instincts and let people tell you if you've got it wrong. I've done a lot of stupid stuff as you might imagine, but I don't care.

Df I'm sure most New Zealanders must find it hard to understand why you would choose to live in their country – Australians I'm sure would find it even harder!

Kevin I love New Zealand with all my heart, but I love living in St Tropez and New York. What we will do ultimately when all this kind of ends is that we will live in those three places and we will have perpetual summer and perpetual stimulus. Because New York really is so stimulating in terms of street beat, poetry, music, art... And it comes up, I don't like top down imposed globalisation and all this high end shit, but New York comes from here [gestures to heart] (*see page 64 *In a New York Minute*). In New Zealand we have a lovely place in the bush and it's very inspirational, very tranquil. It's all inside-outside, all birds, it's all wildlife, it's all vegetation, so it's aaaah. Big places there to work in... It's actually in the middle of a vineyard. So all three places are completely different but authentic in their own environment.

- Df** And give you inspiration in completely different ways – five different parts of you.
- Kevin** Absolutely. You got it, you got it. I can't stand this environment here [Sydney hotel room], I've had this [door] open all morning. When the sun shines this is a terrific environment because you've got the park and the water, but in this kind of weather [drizzling], it's very non-inspirational. You go into any Saatchi & Saatchi office in the world – and I find them anyway – extremely uplifting because they're full of young people. There are ideas wherever you look, there's new stimuli, what people are wearing, and what people are saying, and what's on the wall (*see page 56 *Musings on Creativity*). We are a Lovemarks company, but how you express Lovemarks is open to... everyone's got a point of view about Lovemarks. It's great, you can feel it, it's great.

****Hitting the Mark*** by Kate Bezar

As the great story goes, Lovemarks was conceived on a white linen napkin while Kevin Roberts was fine-dining a la francaise. A few glasses of red into the evening and KR had come upon a solution to the question that had been puzzling him and many marketing/ad types since day dot. What is it that makes the uber-brands such as Apple, Mini, Harley Davidson, Mandela, the Beetles, Virgin Atlantic, Curious George and many others generate 'loyalty beyond reason' amongst consumers and peoples of the world?

Actually, it's not so much a solution to the question, but more of an explanation, or a framework guide as to the answer. As the best frameworks are, Lovemarks is relatively simple. KR puts it down to one thing – love. It's relatively easy to be respected – do a job and do it well, be trustworthy and strive for excellence – but to be loved as well, well that's a whole other matter.

The framework has two axes (see image page 62) – a respect axis and a love axis creating four quadrants. Scoring low on both love and respect makes you a commodity: electricity, toilet paper. Losing out on love but being high in the respect stakes makes something a brand; a bank, an insurance company, boring but you know they'll always do a good job. If the opposite is true, low respect but big love, it is a fad – loved for a very short period of time, but really not adding anything of much importance to people's lives. Which brings us to the top right hand quadrant, oodles of respect and bundles of love, the Holy Grail, Lovemarks. Lovemarks are the brand of cereal you've eaten for 10 years, the new Mini Cooper you're prepared to go on a 12 month waiting list for, the magazine you subscribe to...

In his book, 'The future beyond brands: Lovemarks', KR takes us on a glorious journey, sharing personal anecdotes and universal truths about what it is that generates intense emotional connections. He believes it boils down to three elusive ingredients; mystery, sensuality and intimacy. Mystery is great stories, dreams, and aspirations – Camper's 130 years of shoe-making and the urban myth about the true contents of a Red Bull. Sensuality engages all

our senses – it's the sound of a Harley, the feed of an iPod in your palm, the smell of Coppertone on your skin, the colour of an All Black's jersey. And intimacy, lean closer so I can hear you... Intimacy is about making it personal, it's knowing my name and my coffee order without me having to tell you... That's what makes you return day in day out, to the point where you even feel a tad guilty when you stray to meet a friend for breakfast in another suburb. That's loyalty beyond reason.

Dumbo feather was nominated in February 2005 on www.lovemarks.com as a Lovemark – we're rather chuffed. Visit the site to nominate your Lovemarks and to vote on, and post comments about those that have already been nominated. There's also loads more information on the concept, discussion boards, and transcripts of KR's speeches on the topic. Go on, love a little.